

THE DOCENT EDUCATOR

THE QUARTERLY JOURNAL FOR DEDICATED EDUCATORS

"Object-Based" Activities



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Teaching That's More

Cover:
This cartoon by
James Thurber,
created in 1943,
sums up a great
reason to teach
using object-based
activities ...
if you only
have facts to
talk about,
then there is
precious little
to discuss.

Object-based activities are teaching strategies designed to shift visitors from the passive repose of listening into the active postures of seeking, finding, and/or responding. Object-based activities are employed to encourage learners (visitors) to make discoveries on their own. Because these activities must enfranchise all learners present, regardless of their diverse natures and experiences, such activities must accommodate a wide variety of individual differences.

Whether simple or elaborate, object-based activities are often initiated by asking a question or giving visitors a task to accomplish. The purpose of such questions or tasks is not to test visitors' abilities or memories, but to give them reason for more careful observation and more in-depth involvement.

Asking visitors to locate items by reading labels or text panels does not fit my definition of an object-based activity. While reading labels can assist visitors in identifying objects, it does not guarantee that they will engage with them. The ultimate reason for employing object-based activities is to demonstrate *how* to learn, understand, and/or appreciate objects by modeling methods for increased involvement.

In addition to engagement, object-based activities should offer lessons that can be applied again with similar or related types of objects. For instance, when a docent in a botanical garden or park hands visitors two different leaves and asks that each visitor make note of at least three differences between them, it is not simply for identification. She is challenging visitors to sharpen their

vision and take note of what they see. Rather than expecting visitors only to be able to distinguish between those two leaves in front of them, the docent is anticipating that visitors will learn how an examination of a leaf's shape, color, texture, veining, and so forth can aid in plant identification. And, she is offering her visitors a model of how to identify trees by inspecting their leaves in future encounters.

Constructing Object-Based Activities

Teaching visitors such skills as observing, comparing, classifying, summarizing, interpreting, and hypothesizing by challenging them to participate in an object-based activity models skills that can be used over and over again, with different objects in other settings. And, when constructed properly, object-based activities offer an added bonus — the involvement they initiate encourages greater retention of what is learned (whereas listening does little to ensure that information heard will be remembered or mastered).

Despite the diversity of object-based activities that can be developed and the wide range of settings in which they may be used, all should share several common characteristics. To be appropriate and effective, object-based activities should involve, accommodate, and engage thinking-skills.

✓ Involvement

Object-based activities are participatory, open-ended, and dynamic. They get visitors "doing" and "learning" rather than remembering or confirming what others have learned. Therefore, lectures do not

qualify as object-based activities, even if the information told relates directly and specifically to a particular object. While listening to a lecture can lead to learning, the process is passive and does not require involvement to make discoveries or analyses.

Asking convergent, closed-ended questions, or assigning convergent tasks, is also inappropriate for object-based activities. Convergent questions and tasks require that all visitors find the same answers. Often, they request that visitors recall previously learned knowledge that has nothing to do with the immediate experiences taking place. For instance, asking visitors to identify which of two leaves comes from a maple tree requires remembering such identification through a prior learning experience. Convergent questions and tasks are not appropriate for object-based activities; they exclude from participation those visitors who do not know the correct response.

✓ Accommodation

In his *Theory of Relativity*, Albert Einstein postulated that time, which seems factual, fixed, and immutable, changes based on circumstances. The U.S. military tested his theory in concrete fashion by using two clocks — one on the ground and the other in a plane that flew for the entire 15-hour testing period. The results proved his theory — the clock in the plane ran slower than the one on the ground. This objective measurement is not the only way to confirm the relativity of time, however. Differences in time can also be experienced personally and subjectively. Just consider how differently time is experienced when

Engaging, Open, and Fun

the same amount is spent stuck in traffic rather than at home relaxing.

What connection does the measurement of time have to creating and using "object-based activities" at museums, historic sites, zoos, aquariums, parks, and gardens? It serves as a reminder that everything in your collection, no matter how factual, concrete, or fixed they may seem, can mean different things to different people. Like the time spent at your institution, your collection will be experienced in a manner that is relative to the backgrounds, learning styles, age-levels, interests, and cultural identities of your visitors.

There is no one, fixed way to interpret or appreciate a work of art. There is no one, fixed way to view or understand a period or event in history. There is no one, fixed way to examine or consider the implications of a scientific specimen. And, there is no one, fixed way to focus on or respond to a botanical environment. Countless variables will affect perception and reflection. Even you, the docent or educator, will affect the visitors' experiences, and will shape how they relate and respond to the collection

✓ Engagement

Object-based activities should require that visitors do something, find something, and/or respond to something. It should prompt them to think, to sort, to consider, and/or to decide. It has implications and applications beyond the specific examples that are being used for teaching, because object-based activities are meant to teach visitors *skills for thinking* in addition to object-specific information.

What are the skills that object-based activities can teach? They are the same skills of analysis and synthesis used by experts within the disciplines of art, history, and the sciences. Though the activities docents employ may request a less sophisticated level of involvement than those of experts, the thinking skills of observation, comparison, classification, summarization, interpretation, and hypothesis are the same types of thinking skills employed by authorities.

Relating the aforementioned thinking skills to the mental tasks performed by experts may seem an oversimplification. And, while it is a simplification, it is not overly simplified. The difference is solely in the level of sophistication, not in the mental activity. The challenge for educators is breaking down activities that we can do and understand almost without reflection into

their component parts in order to teach others who are less familiar with the process. For those of us who read, for example, the act of reading is an activity we do without giving consideration to the mechanics. Ah, but to teach others who do not read how to do so is challenging and complex! We docents and staff educators are more like teachers of reading in that we are not only teaching about the objects (recognition of the words), but also teaching how to decipher and comprehend their meaning (the act of reading and comprehension).

Several Sample Object-Based Activities

- Have visitors divide the objects in a gallery or large display case into categories of their own making. Challenge them to *categorize* by sorting things using perceived

Continued on the next page.

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minds in motion
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page.

similarities or differences. Do not be overly concerned with the categories created, but listen carefully to the justifications used for creating the categories and assigning objects to them.

Once visitors have experienced such a sorting task, understanding that authorities create such categories as schools of art, periods in history, phyla of mammals, genera of plants, or types of rocks makes more sense. It is at that time, that a discussion of such categories may be appropriate.

- In an historic setting, visitors can examine the evidence of a particular historic period and can make assumptions about life during that time based on the evidence and artifacts presented.

For instance, have visitors examine the many items and evidence of activities presented in this 18th century kitchen. Then, have them *hypothesize* a list of chores and responsibilities that could have been necessary to keep this kitchen working and functioning smoothly.

- Dioramas in natural history institutions were created to depict a context for the animal mounts displayed. Challenge visitors to *interpret* these depictions by asking them to find as much meaning from the animal's environment as they can. Have them look at the evidence presented, such as in this diorama with brown bears, and ask them to extract meaning from what they can see of the animal's surroundings, activities, and circumstances.



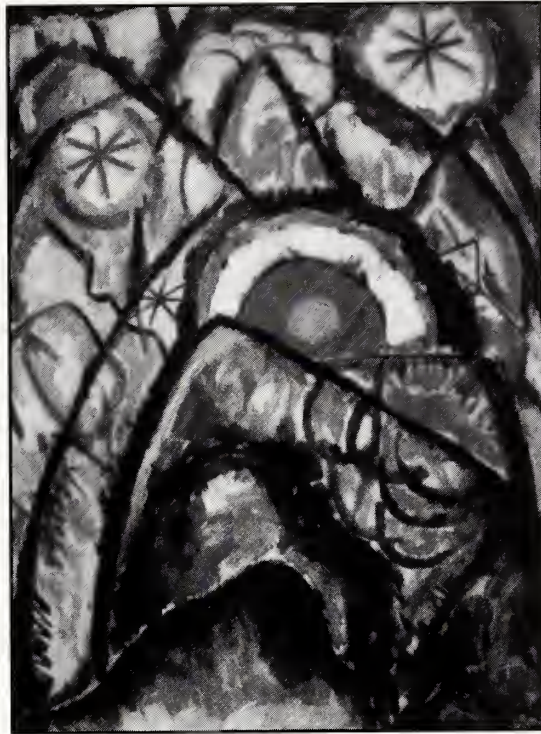
An 18th century kitchen



A natural history diorama

• The titles of artworks often summarize the artists' literal or figurative thoughts or intentions. Have visitors condense their own thoughts and reactions to works by asking them to create titles of their own making for works such as the one presented here. Once they *summarize* their responses into the abbreviated form of titles, have them reverse the process by elaborating upon which variables presented in the work were most influential to their titles' creation.

Object-based activities are not only involving and engaging for visitors, they keep lessons from becoming stale and educators from becoming bored. The responses and participation from visitors always feels fresh, and new ideas seem to come forth each time an object-based activity is employed. Such dynamics are a lot more fun than lecturing for both the learner and teacher. Try it; you'll like it!



Marsden Hartley, *Painting Number One*, 1913.
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden
Lincoln, Nebraska (from the Sheldon Gallery's Art Card series --
see article about this series on page #18.)

Alan Gartenhaus
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Creative Writing Activities

by
Shin
Yu
Pai

As a poet teaching in a museum environment, I often turn to writing-based activities to assist visitors in appreciating and understanding works of art. For the novice art viewer with a limited art background and art vocabulary, a writing exercise functions as a strategy to slow down the mind in order to focus upon looking closely at visual details and clues that help a viewer intuitively make sense of a work.

Using writing to teach about the visual arts fulfills a dual function by assisting the visitor to gain a basic entry point into the artwork and giving a viewer a springboard into a deeper exploration and transformation of their own experience and relationship to that work. Through language, the viewer is encouraged and challenged to claim and articulate his or her experience of art by finding a personal voice to talk about these objects. This process of reflection can provide insight into the creative process of the visitor, as well as the process of the artist.

Viewing a work of art closely parallels the process of reading a work of poetry or literature — both textual and visual languages share a common vocabulary of technical terms that can include setting, style, character, mood, and narrative. Both organize and make sense of the world in similar ways. We read a poem or story on different levels, in the same manner that we approach looking at art objects. Within the process of making a concentrated reading or visual inventory, we may

pass an eye over the work, scan for subject matter, take a longer and deeper look for technical and contextual concerns, in addition to taking time to examine what we assume to be an artist's intent.

As a poet, it has taken me years to connect the relationship between form and writing. Coming to writing from a non-Western orientation to the English language, I have never felt connected to the notion of form as I learned it in poetry workshops — writing in lines of iambic pentameter, rhyme, and traditional meter. Form for me was only an experiment, or imitation at best, devoid of meaning.

It was not until I began to look carefully at the painted machine-like images of John Pomara speeding across the canvas and the pollen forms of Wolfgang Laib that the notion of how form shapes and embodies an artist's vision exploded open. Words function in the same way as paint or other substances; units of language live and move across a blank surface with the energy and resonance of each word unfolding an organic form relevant to a subject, versus a set of pre-determined parameters.

The exercises that follow are object-based activities that have been tried and tested on audiences of various ages at the Dallas Museum of Art. Adaptable to objects in any art museum, they are strategies for approaching works of art and for delving deeper into personal connections and more enriching experiences.

Constructing Narratives

Choose a work of art that depicts people engaged in an activity or event. Study facial expressions, body language, and the relationship between characters. Using these visual clues, write a story about the scene. What led up to this moment? What comes next in the story? (While a range of objects could work for this activity, history painting and classical works lend themselves well to this exercise.) Share the stories. What overlap do you find in the different stories and discuss how the artwork provides possibilities for multiple narratives.

A Sense of Place

Choose a work that depicts a landscape or place. Pretend you are writing a postcard home to a friend from this place. What are the sights, smells, sounds, and flavors of this place? Why have you gone there? Describe what is happening around you.

Character Sketch

Using a portrait, create a character sketch of the person. How does this person wear his or her hair and clothing? What does this person's environment and the objects included in the portrait tell you about who he or she might be? What do you think this individual's personality would be like based on what you see? Imagine having a conversation with this person. What would he or she speak with you about?

and Museum Visitors

I remember ...

Decorative art objects lend themselves especially well to this exercise. Select an object. What memories, either private or public — real or imagined, does this object unlock for you? What time does this recall? Write a ten to twenty line poem recording the visual, sensual, and emotional details you associate or find with this object, using the phrase “I remember ...” to start off the exercise. (This activity may be more effective with older audiences.)

Visual Poetry

Find a work of art in the museum that has strong formal elements: form, shape, line, color, and texture. Take this object as a point of departure to write a piece of visually engaging poetry that connects to the formal qualities of the artwork you selected. Write a poem in the shape of a ziggurat, a mountain, or a tree — whatever form is in front of you. Consider where you break a line and the physical arrangement of text on the page. Keep the text moving, let the visual image guide your hand and eye.

Collage/Assemblage

Spend time looking at works that employ collage techniques in some way. How are these works visually organized; what seems accidental and what seems purposeful? Make your own collage out of words by cutting up sentences from a newspaper and placing them in a paper bag. Shake up the bag, remove

the phrases at random, and copy out the text. Revise or rearrange the text to construct a narrative.

Haiku

At its simplest, the Japanese haiku is a brief, three-line poem composed of 17 syllables broken into lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables. On a deeper level, traditional haiku employ images from the natural world and connect to a specific season or time of year. Because of these qualities, suitable objects for this exercise might include landscapes and other scenic vistas. Haiku is traditionally used in close association with *haibun*, or prose form, as in the work of Matsuo Basho. A variation on the haiku writing exercise might be to alternate writing in verse with writing in prose. Approach your chosen object using both forms.

Shin Yu Pai is a poet and writer living in Boston, MA. She is the former docent coordinator for the Dallas Museum of Art in Dallas, TX. Her article, “A Process-Oriented Approach to Engaging the Senses,” appeared in the Winter 2001–02 issue of The Docent Educator.

*“Through language,
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This process
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of the artist.”*

F.Y.C.

For Your Consideration

"Ahoy," Bay Area Visitors and Residents

Surrounded by water on three sides, San Francisco has been a major seaport since its inception. While steamships gave way to container ships and yachts, the city retains an important waterfront, and the San Francisco Maritime Museum honors this history.

Crafted in the shape of an ocean liner, the 250-foot-long museum near Fisherman's Wharf is a perfect base for the San Francisco Maritime National Historic Park. This "floating park" includes restored schooners, ferries, and tugboats, and the museum is testament to the role these vessels played in the city's development. Visitors can see historical photographs and paintings, as well as artifacts such as ship's masts and figureheads.

Permanent exhibits cover aspects of maritime life. "Sparks, Waves, and Wizards: Communications at Sea" is a look at modes of maritime communications since the early 1900's, ranging from semaphore flags to satellite-operated systems. Visitors can put themselves "on the bridge" as they view vessels in the bay, chart their movements by telescope, and gauge vessel statistics using a computerized Coast Guard map.



Lesser-Known Bay Area Attractions

The San Francisco Bay Area is loaded with small, specialized museums like the Maritime Museum, focusing on everything from history to kitsch.

The Performing Arts Library and Museum highlights music, dance, theater, and opera from the Gold Rush days on.

The Cartoon Art Museum houses a 6,000-piece collection of works by underground cartoonists like R. Crumb, as well as temporary exhibitions featuring the drawings of such modern masters as Bill (Calvin and Hobbes) Watterson.

The intimate *Museum of Craft and Folk Art* mounts five annual exhibitions focusing on the traditional and the contemporary.



What is a Museum?

Whale ribs, the hand of a mermaid, the Passion of Christ carved on a plum pit, the robe of the king of Virginia: These were among the oddities that Londoners of the 1630's could see for a sixpence at the house/museum of John Tradescant and his son. The Ark, as it was called, was arguably history's first explicitly public museum.

Today, the number of museums has exploded — Las Vegas alone has more than 30, ranging in subject from celebrity wigs to modern masters. London's Victoria and Albert Museum is a gorgeous attic of empire.

The Milwaukee Art Museum is housed in a contemporary building so astonishing that visitors may have only the haziest memory of what they saw inside. The only constant among museums may be every institution's impulse to present the wonderful, the important, the strange, or the rare.



"Crazy English"

We greatly appreciate all the writers — both staff members and volunteers — who contribute articles to share in each and every issue of *The Docent Educator*. In recognition of the many challenges that beset those who put their thoughts and techniques into words, we offer this little poem.

*The verbs in English are a fright.
How can we learn to read and write?
Today we speak, but first we spoke;
Some faucets leak, but never loke.
Today we write, but first we wrote;
We bit our tongues, but never bote.
Each day I teach, for years I taught,
And preachers preach, but never praught.
This tale I tell: this tale I told;
I smell the flowers, but never smold.
If knights still slay, as once they slew;
Then do we play, as once we plew?
If I still do as once I did,
Then do cows moo, as they once mid?*

by Richard Lederer

It Works for Me ...

Sharing Successful Techniques and Ideas

Every semester with the students in my social studies methods course, I draw a blank time line on the board of the last 10,000 years of human history and ask the students how well they could fill in the major events. A nervous silence immediately permeates the room.

My students readily admit that they know very little history, and most say they would get an "F" if they had to complete the time line.

But I then ask my students to write down memories of how they were taught social studies over

the years. Overwhelmingly, they say they have experienced traditional teaching methods.

Many critics of progressive education say that our children are not learning because of progressive and child-centered philosophies. But this is just not the reality.

My students' memories are filled with the same list: teacher lecture and silent students, rote memorization, textbooks, work-sheets, tests, and irrelevant content void of emotion and controversy.

If we really want meaningful learning in history, or any subject, then we had better start questioning how we're teaching.

Steven Wolk
Assistant Professor of
Teacher Education
Northeastern Illinois University

Questioning Art

an inquiry approach to teaching art appreciation

by Alan Gartenhaus

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Time to Change an Object-Based Tour

by
Jennifer
Masengarb

One of the most difficult jobs for those involved with student programs in cultural organizations is the process of change.

Reassessing and critically evaluating a long-standing children's tour, convincing some of the need for change, and ultimately deciding to revise the format can be a daunting task. Although docents may have become comfortable with an established tour they have given for years, listening closely and asking their opinions often reveals their frustrations. Supplying solutions for these frustrations helps ease the process of change. More importantly, hearing from the teachers and students you are serving can provide the guiding direction to improve the tour.

The Chicago Architecture Foundation (CAF) is dedicated to advancing public interest and education in architecture and related design. Approximately 400 docents volunteer their time and energy to conduct tours by foot, boat, bus, bike, and train. Using the motto "The City is Our Museum," we offer more than 70 different tours for children and adults. Last year, close to 2000 elementary school students took a walking tour with a CAF docent.

For students in grades 5-8, we offer a program called the *Children's Loop Tour*. ("The Loop" describes the train tracks that circle the downtown business district where most of the skyscrapers are located.) The primary purpose of this 90-minute walking tour of downtown Chicago is to introduce students to ten important concepts of architecture

and illustrate the development of the city's architectural history.

The Problems and Challenges of the Old Tour

CAF originally began this walking tour in 1980 and, although the number of students we serve grew each year, the method of instruction on the tour remained unchanged until the 1999-2000 school year. In the summer of 1999, the *Children's Loop Tour* was significantly updated and revised to its present form. During those summer months of evaluating and revising the tour, five main problems and challenges were identified with the original tour's format and materials:

1. There was a lack of consistency in the buildings (our objects) along the route docents chose to cover and in the message they conveyed to the students.
2. Many docents felt overwhelmed with the massive amounts of information they knew and believed they were expected to share with the students in 90 minutes. As a result, students finished the tour inundated with facts and dates swimming in their heads but without a way to tie the information to a bigger picture.
3. Other than covering a fewer number of buildings along the route, the original tour for middle school students was essentially a watered-down version of the material presented to adults.
4. The original tour contained no accompanying teacher or student materials.

5. Teachers expressed a desire that our tour and programs incorporate and adhere to the state and city academic standards they are required to comply with.

Our Solution for a New Tour

1. New consistency in the message.
In revising the original tour, we did not change any of the 10 buildings on the tour route. Instead, we reorganized the message and the method of interpretation, reinforcing the need for a common voice presented by docents and heard by teachers and students. Many of our teachers bring their classes downtown to CAF each year and these educators value the opportunity to improve their own knowledge of architecture and enjoy knowing what to expect from the program. Standardizing the tour also helped to ensure that the docents' words complement the information in the teacher and student books of pre- and post-visit activities. Exactly how the docents cover each building and associated theme is up to them, but the goal is to introduce a particular architecture theme and reinforce it using a specific building.

2. Each building now has a theme.
Rather than thinking about each of the ten buildings as an isolated architectural and historical object, tour buildings are now used to illustrate a larger concept or theme. The theme associated with each (such as design, building technology, historic preservation, materials and ornamentation, structure, style, and art) gives the students a framework to anchor their newfound knowledge.

... Now What?

It's hard for children (and adults!) to remember long lists of facts, figures, names, and dates. For a new learner of architecture, these don't provide any context of how the building relates to the bigger picture. Teaching with thematic concepts allows students to attach meaning to the new architecture they will see on their tour and then translate those same important ideas, inherent in all buildings, to any structure they encounter.

Typically in giving adult tours, docents are trained to share as much information as possible over a broad range of topics. Tours for students are strikingly different. With the *Children's Loop Tour*, docents need to clearly focus and limit the type of information they give their group, and then repeat it again in new and different ways. This was the most difficult new concept for docents who had been leading this tour previously. Many docents initially feared that if they didn't share all their knowledge, they weren't giving the students their money's worth. It is true that each building could be studied from the point of view of all ten themes. However, choosing to focus the students' attention on one strong idea helps to illustrate each building's unique qualities. Docents no longer feel burdened with the task of sharing the entire history of each building.

3. *Helpful methods of engaging and interacting.* As with learners of all ages, students require interaction to fully grasp concepts and information. By encouraging the student groups to become involved in the tour, the docent shifts from being a "fount of

knowledge" to a facilitator in their learning. Docent interaction with the students *and* the buildings is much more exciting for everyone.

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Most of our docents now use ten Theme Sticks on their tours. Theme Sticks are simply wooden tongue depressors that we pre-printed with the name of one of the ten buildings and the corresponding theme. At the start of the tour, the docent hands out one of the ten Theme Sticks to each student (or pair of students). The docent then explains that at the end of the tour each student will be responsible for sharing several important aspects relating to their building's theme. A few reminders about this process along the way encourage the group to keep their eyes and ears open. The use of this teaching tool throughout the tour encourages the students to listen carefully, become involved in the learning process, and remain accountable for what they have learned.

This method also creatively involves each person in the group and allows even the quiet students a chance to shine. The students are not surprised and threatened at the end of the tour when the docent launches review questions. In addition, they also don't feel responsible for remembering absolutely every detail from the 90-minute tour.

4. *Docent, student, and teacher support materials.* Unlike a typical adult tour, this student tour and the time the docent spends on the street are part of a larger curriculum framework. It is important that docents occasionally review these materials so they can see how all three components (pre- and post-visit lessons and tour) must work together. Although the tour is the highlight of the student's learning, it must plug

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into a larger framework.

The new docent manual for the tour lists the themes for each building, building information, historical information, and possible questions to use on the tour. The Teacher Prep Pack and 10 color slides of the buildings are sent to teachers in the weeks before they arrive. The teacher book features pre- and post-visit activities and a map for preparing students in advance and for further study in the classroom after the tour.

Student booklets are given to the teacher on the day of the tour to take back to the classroom. (Using the books while students walk on the tour is too difficult and distracting.) These booklets contain a map of the route for review, information on the buildings' architect, year of completion, and address. A drawing, new vocabulary, and some additional text help to supplement what the docent has already said. Each building also features an activity connected to a primary source, such as: an architect's obituary, census data, a historical photograph, a postcard, or an advertisement.

5. *Academic standards.* At the request of Chicago teachers, the tour and accompanying student pre- and post-visit activities incorporate and adhere to the *Illinois State Goals* and *Chicago Academic Standards* for Social Sciences in 5th through 8th grades. Each lesson and activity idea in the teacher book names the corresponding standard number and the entire list is reprinted in the back. Academic standards for your area are not difficult to obtain. Contact your state or city board of education office for a printed copy. Most are also

posted on their websites. Check out those of the Chicago Public Schools as an example: www.cps.k12.il.us/Instructional/CAS. Rather than viewing them as a burden, we've used the standards as a tool to weave together a series of requirements into meaningful real-world learning experiences. They also aid teachers in defending their rationale and expense of taking students away from school. Finally, including academic standards gives the tour a life beyond the time the students spend with the docent on the street.

Final Thoughts

Changing an established tour and asking docents to revise how they presented information and approached "object-based" activities in *the Children's Loop Tour* was not an easy task. However, taking the leap has proven to be beneficial for docents, teachers, and, most importantly, students. Involving the docents from the start of the revision process was an important factor. Asking their thoughts about the original tour allowed us to target their frustrations and create solutions to make their job easier and more exciting. Listening to the teachers' needs helped point us in new directions to serve them better with support materials. Finally, seeing and hearing the students interact more with docents and the buildings has shown us how they can wrap their brains around new concepts and then apply that knowledge in their own environments.

Jennifer Masengrab is Education Programs Specialist at the Chicago Architectural Foundation in Chicago, Illinois. She is also the author and illustrator of the Children's Loop Tour.

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- ***Creative Thinking*** - provoking visitors' interest, participation, imagination, and expansive thinking. Alan Gartenhaus, instructor.
- ***Get Real! Using Objects to Teach Across the Curriculum*** - a co-operative in-service event for your area's classroom teachers. Jackie Littleton, leader.
- ***Little Ones*** - successful touring techniques and teaching methods for pre- and primary-school visitors. Jackie Littleton, instructor.

Since every workshop is customized to the particular needs, interests, and resources of the hosting institution(s), other topics than those above may be requested to guide the content of a workshop.

The following institutions and organizations are among those having received one or more
Minds in Motion Workshops

The Art Institute of Chicago - Chicago, IL
The Bayou Bend House and Collection - Houston, TX
Bowdoin College, Museum of Art - Brunswick, ME
The Bowers Museum of Cultural Arts - Santa Ana, CA
Buffalo Bill Historical Center - Cody, WY
Eastern WA Historical Society - Spokane, WA
Children's Museum of Lake Charles - Lake Charles, LA
The Chrysler Museum - Norfolk, VA
Cincinnati Art Museum - Cincinnati, OH
Dartmouth College, Hood Museum - Hanover, NH
Denver Museum of Natural History - Denver, CO
Desert Botanical Garden - Phoenix, AZ
The Docent League of So. California - Los Angeles, CA
High Museum of Art - Atlanta, GA
Houston Museum of Natural Science - Houston, TX
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The Minneapolis Institute of Arts - Minneapolis, MN
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A New Life for

by
Kristin
Gallas

A drawer full of late 19th century objects, collected for an antiquated tour called “Grandma’s Attic,” stood unused for many years in the *Montana Homeland* exhibit at the Montana Historical Society. In the 21st century, many of the students who visit have grandparents who were born in the 1940’s and 1950’s. These grandparents do not have attics with Marcel irons and stereoscopes in them. When the “Grandma’s Attic” tour was created in the early 1980’s, it was very popular with young elementary and pre-school groups. The tour basically functioned on the “what might this

be” premise and gave the students information about life in the late 1800’s. By 1998, the popularity of the tour waned, so we decided to preserve the objectives and age-focus of the tour, but to spice it up a bit.

The education office staff sat for a long time contemplating this assemblage of objects: a Marcel iron; a lace chemise; a thimble; a razor strop; a candle mold; a spittoon; and a spat. We used primary and secondary sources to research life in Helena, our town, during the 19th century. Contemporary children’s books written about the era also served as research tools. One book in particular spurred our imaginations. *Welcome to Samantha’s World — 1904*, from The American Girls Collection, is part of a series of books that tells the story of a young girl in early 20th century America. We decided to create our own “Samantha,” name her Elizabeth Harris, and craft a life for her in 1903 Helena, Montana.

So began the “Diary of a Victorian Girl” tour.

The vehicle for telling the story became a diary documenting a week in Elizabeth’s life, each entry utilizing objects from the drawer to drive the story. The complete archives and library maintained by the Historical Society made research on early 20th century Helena easy for us to accomplish. The fictitious Elizabeth and her family “live” on a real street in Helena and her father “owns” a store that once existed. She and her brother, Robert, explore some of Helena’s old streets and bygone businesses. A photograph, discovered in our extensive photographic archives, of three unidentified Montana children inspired the family brood: Elizabeth (age 11), Robert (age 9), and Caroline (age 6).

Another photo of two young girls in front of the roller coaster at Columbia Gardens, a once grand, now demolished amusement park in Butte, Montana, served as the basis for the family’s trip to the park.

As the construction of Elizabeth’s diary evolved, we added more objects to the drawer: the aforementioned photographs; an oil lamp; a shaving brush and mug; a chamber pot; marbles; and instructions for a Victorian children’s game to be played during the tour. Our first test audience was our docent corps. They were delighted with the new tour format and made some suggestions on how to improve it. Based on their feedback, we made some changes to the text and added a flat iron and sling shot to the object collection. Testing the tour with children was most delightful. They were eager, filled with wonder about what objects might exist in the drawer, and fascinated to be read to and from a diary.

The tour opens with a brief age-appropriate discussion about what primary and secondary sources are, emphasizing the idea of keeping a diary about one’s private thoughts and activities. The students are then told that today they will hear a reading from the diary of a young girl who lived in Helena in 1903. They immediately want to know if it is real, and if Elizabeth was a real person. The students are asked to listen to the diary reading prior to making their own guess as to authenticity. One or two objects are passed around and briefly discussed to accompany each entry. For example, when Elizabeth helps her mother with the laundry, the flat iron is passed around and we discuss how it works and the



Students investigate a butter press on the “Diary of a Victorian Girl” tour.
photo: courtesy of the Montana Historical Society, Helena

Old Objects

difference between it and contemporary modes of ironing a shirt.

By the end of the tour, the students are completely wrapped up in Elizabeth's life and want to hear more. They want to know what happened to her after the diary ends. Most of them are convinced that Elizabeth and her diary were real. After being told that the story and people were made up, we talk about historical fiction, and then compare it to contemporary books and movies that are of the same genre.

Students are also intrigued by the family's trip to Columbia Gardens amusement park. Naturally, they want to know if this place really existed, and, if it did, can they still go there today. We tell them that the Gardens, which were real and built in 1899 by Montana Senator and "copper king" William A. Clark, was demolished in 1973 to make way for open pit mining in the city of Butte. This provides us with an opportunity to talk to students about historic preservation, as none of the buildings mentioned in the story still exist. Many students are immediate advocates for preserving old structures, especially amusement parks!

The following is a sample of one entry from Elizabeth's diary. The words in bold type refer to the objects that are passed around during a reading.

Monday, July 20, 1903

After doing my morning chores, I sat down with father, as usual, to talk with him while he shaved. Father owns a grocery store in Helena. It's called the Rodney Street Grocery Company. Everyone in town says he's the nicest man. I love him because he's my Father. He sharpened his straight razor on the

razor strop and then he used a shaving brush to put soapsuds from the mug all over his face. Then, very gently, he dragged the razor across his face to get rid of the whiskers, rinsing the razor in the sink after every stroke. We are one of the few families in Helena to have indoor plumbing. I get to use the water closet at night, but my best friend Sarah still has to use a chamber pot or go out to the outhouse.

This entry is particularly interesting to kids, as they have never seen a man shave with a straight razor and are always fascinated with the use of a chamber pot.

The "Diary of a Victorian Girl" tour has breathed new life into a collection of hands-on objects from the turn of the 20th century. It also serves to hold the attention of the children, as they can relate to the story of someone about their own age. They can't wait to hear what will happen next, or to see what objects will be presented. A tour like this is simple to create and effectively engages young people with historic objects. With solid research, a good collection of hands-on artifacts, and a little imagination, your museum can create a "new life" for some old, perhaps forgotten, objects.



This photograph of the Porter children, ages 7, 9, and 5, inspired the creation of the diary's fictitious author and her siblings in the "Diary of Victorian Girl" tour.

photo: courtesy of the Montana Historical Society, Helena

Kristin Gallas has been the education officer at the Montana Historical Society since 1998. During that time she has created several new tours and outreach materials on art and Montana history topics, including a classroom educational kit and hands-on tour based on the works of cowboy artist Charles M. Russell. Her two previous contributions to The Docent Educator can be found in the Autumn 2000 and Winter 1999/2000 issues.

Taking Aim at a Moving Target

Objects such as turtles, squirrels, and woodpeckers are among the best part of our nature trail tours at Camp Tyler, an outdoor learning center that is located in the East Texas piney woods. Unfortunately, we just don't know from one time to the next which objects will be available. Most of the plants and animals along the trails are seasonal. In addition, the animals are mobile and, in many cases, nocturnal. Even the level of the lake and the habitats it creates rise and fall as rainfall varies.

If you teach in a botanical garden, park, zoo, aquarium, or nature center, you probably experience similar challenges. Your "collection" changes, moves, hides, or otherwise is predictably unpredictable. Without proper planning, such comings and goings can really throw tours for a loop. However, it needn't. Docents who work with third graders visiting the nature trails at Camp Tyler have developed "generic" object-based activities that meet state-mandated goals in our changeable environment and get the children learning and excited.

Third grade teachers bring their students to Camp Tyler to give them hands-on experiences with a specific goal in the mandated Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Science (TEKS). *The student knows that living organisms need food, water, light, air, a way to dispose of waste, and an environment in which to live. The student is expected to:*

- a. identify and describe the habitats of organisms within an ecosystem;
- b. observe and identify organisms with similar needs that compete with

one another for resources such as oxygen, water, food, or space;

c. describe environmental changes in which some organisms would thrive, become ill, or perish; and

d. describe how living organisms modify their physical environment to meet their needs

Good Clues and Red Herrings

"Good Clues and Red Herrings" takes advantage of 8- to 10-year olds' budding interest in mysteries. We explain that mystery writers usually give us lots of clues to help us solve the case along with the hero, but they also put in "red herrings," false clues that deliberately lead us in the wrong direction. In this activity, the children are asked to answer a question and then give either a good clue or a red herring as to why they decided on that answer.

For example, if we come across a newly-downed tree along the trail, we ask them whether the tree fell through natural forces or was cut deliberately. Some of the answers might be, "It fell naturally because the stump is ragged on one edge."

"It was cut deliberately because the stump is smooth across most of the surface."

"It fell naturally because I can see a large lightning scar along the trunk."

"It was cut deliberately because lightning had damaged it and it might have fallen across the trail."

After a number of good clues and red herrings are offered, we decide which clues we think will tell us an accurate answer. If the tree was cut deliberately, why was it cut? Why was it left in the woods instead of being hauled away? Why would we leave any dead trees in the woods?

All of these questions lead us back to the TEKS objectives.

Although the questions we ask do have "correct" answers, the process of "Good Clues and Red Herrings" encourages students to hypothesize (to make guesses based on evidence they discover). It is this process of hypothesizing — looking, finding evidence, considering the implications of the evidence, and justifying any conclusions made — that is of primary importance. The activity allows for a multitude of possibilities and allows for "wrong" answers that are well justified to be just as welcome as "right" answers. (Often, the "wrong" answers are possible and sometimes display evidence of highly creative thinking.)

Take a Closer Look

Third and fourth graders are expected to learn to use a variety of scientific "tools," including magnifying glasses. We use this need, and the students' natural interest in making things appear bigger than they are, in another object-based activity that can be used whatever the season, whatever the place.

We select a rather large area that, nevertheless, has clearly defined boundaries. It might be a clearing in the woods, or the lakeshore from the dock to the boathouse. We ask the children to guess how many animals they think live within that defined space. Of course, they rarely can see any from our vantage point. When we suggest that there may be thousands of animals living there, the children begin to understand that we're going to have to "take a closer look."

Each team of two to four children is given a magnifying glass and instructed to find, and count,



When participating in the activity "Take a Closer Look," teams of two to four children are given magnifying glasses and instructed to find, and count, as many animals as they can in a well-defined space.

as many animals as they can. Naturally, we define "animals" in the largest sense, "members of the animal kingdom." After discussing a few safety rules about turning over logs with sticks rather than hands, and keeping the sun's rays from being focused by the magnifying glass, the teams are released to the hunt. When their enthusiasm begins to lag, or after 15 to 20 minutes, whatever comes first, we gather the teams and begin to collect their data. We do a little math, such as estimating and rounding, and keep a running total "in our heads" as each group reports their findings. Sometimes, if they happen to uncover an ant bed or termite mound, the figures can run into the thousands!

Follow-up questions take us, once again, back to the TEKS goals. How are the habitats we uncovered within this small ecosystem alike and how are they different for the different "animals" we found? How might the habitat be different later in the year, or after a hard rain? What did each of the animals do to change the environment?

While determining the "right" answers, we leave lots of opportunity for divergent thinking. What are some ways we might protect animals in this environment? In what ways is this environment like the one in which we live? What might happen if we removed one of the types of animals living in this environment? The children's imaginations allow them to take a closer look at more than just a small clearing in the woods.

"Sponge" Activities

Some of the object-based activities we use at Camp Tyler are designed to "soak up" the time while we are waiting for someone to catch up or while we are moving from place to place. These transitional moments can be used to motivate a group or to help them focus. They are not only useful with any sort of object, they can be stretched or shortened as time allows. Because they soak up time, we call them "sponge" activities.

ABC Hunt

This activity combines observation skills with language arts. The children try to find one or more objects in nature to correspond with each letter of the alphabet as we take our nature hike. A variation has them find specific letters while we move from one point to another, e.g., find as many things as you can that begin with A,B,C, or D before we get to that tall pine tree.

Paint Sample Hunt

Before the hike begins, children are given paint sample cards (available from most home decorating or hardware stores) and asked to find the exact colors in the surrounding environment that correspond to the ones on their cards. Another variation of this idea asks children to find a particular color (red, for example) before they reach the next stop along the trail, or to find as many things as possible that are not green or brown.

It's always fun to share our resident corn snake with the third graders, but he's one of the few objects that we know will be where we want him, when we want him. (There was, of course, the day he escaped into the Camp office!) Because docents must be flexible and be prepared for the unexpected — including the times when objects don't stay put — it's nice to have activities that are suitable for any object, or lack thereof, that may happen along the way.

Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor

Reinforcing Object-Based Learning

by
Karen
Janovy

As students leave the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden of the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, a docent gives each of them a set of four trading cards. The trading cards, not unlike baseball cards, are printed on two sides. On one side, the cards feature a favorite image of the building, painting, or sculpture from the Sheldon's collection of 20th-century American art. On the other side of the card, students discover questions about the artwork.

For instance, the back of the card featuring *Room in New York* by Edward Hopper, poses the following questions:

- Where are you, the viewer?
- What is the woman doing?
- Why is the man reading the newspaper?
- Edward Hopper is known for depicting loneliness and isolation in his paintings. Does this painting show those feelings?

- What shape has the artist repeated numerous times?
- Sometimes artists repeat colors to unify a composition. Has Hopper done this? What color?

The answers are printed in smaller type, upside down on the bottom of the card. The style of inquiry-based learning on which the questions are based complements the more open-ended inquiry-based tours given by the docents. The docents themselves prepared the questions for the trading cards, designing them to reinforce the learning opportunities provided during tours.

For years, Sheldon docents have handed student visitors postcards of a collection image, stickers, or pencils to reinforce the learning that occurs during tours. The latest innovation of the trading cards has been a major hit with both students and teachers. The cards were the inspiration of the Education Committee of the Nebraska Art Association and Sheldon's docent council and were made possible by a donation from

the estate of a long-time supporter of the arts in Lincoln. The images chosen for the cards have no copyright issues, so the cards also can be sold in the museum shop. As soon as the image choices were finalized, the docent council convened many sessions to write questions that built upon the information learned during the tours.

The Sheldon staff was helpful in providing color transparencies, proofreading, and interpretive information.

Once the cards were printed, scores of volunteers were marshaled to assemble the card packets. Volunteers sorted the cards into sets of four, from twenty-six images as possibilities, sealed them in small plastic sleeves, and placed an oval sticker on each packet acknowledging the donors. A printer who is a trustee of the Nebraska Art Association, our museum's primary support organization, printed the cards. He not only worked closely with staff in the final design format, but also provided additional financial support.

The Sheldon Education Department evaluates the success of its docent-led tours using ongoing teacher surveys. The evaluation form includes the question: "How do you and your students utilize the trading cards?" In response, teachers have reported such things as "... we share, compare, and discuss," or "The students traded for their favorites!" and "Students loved this. They talked about the ones that they had seen and told others about what they learned." Several Sheldon docents who were delegates to the 2001 National Docent Symposium in San Antonio provided samples of the cards to other delegates and reported a great deal of interest in, and enthusiasm for, them. For additional information on the mechanics of creating such a useful teaching resource, please contact us at kjanovy1@unl.edu or call (402) 472-2461.



Art cards serve to remind school-aged visitors of their museum visit and to reinforce their encounters with works of art. The cards, which come in packs of four different images, are a gift from the Nebraska Art Association and provided by the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery with a grant from the estate of Marjorie L. Barstow.

Karen Janovy has been curator of education at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln since 1987. She is also Senior Lecturer in the University's Museum Studies Program where she teaches the graduate course, "Museum Education."



Young visitors to the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden seem delighted with the art cards that are distributed to them following docent-led tours. The cards are prized by many of the students and are sometimes traded like baseball cards.
photo: Karen Janovy

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Evaluating Object-Based Activities

Like all teaching strategies and their implementation, object-based activities should be frequently reviewed and evaluated. Here is a checklist that can be adapted for self-evaluation, peer evaluation, or formal evaluation when using object-based activities for teaching.

- ✓ Which type of object-based activity was employed?
- ✓ What was the overall theme of the tour, and how did the activity reinforce that theme?
- ✓ What learning skills were requested/applied to the activity?
- ✓ Was the question or task used to initiate the activity "open ended?"
- ✓ Did the audience understand what they were being asked to do?
- ✓ Was adequate time provided to accomplish the task or answer the question?
- ✓ Was a warning given before ending the activity that told visitors that they should wrap up their thoughts or search?
- ✓ Was the question or task repeated for the audience before asking them to respond?
- ✓ Were the responses from visitors eagerly forthcoming; did many participate?
- ✓ Did the audience do most of the talking or did the docent?
- ✓ Did the docent accommodate, validate, and enlarge upon all answers offered?
- ✓ If you were to conduct the same object-based activity again, how would you change or improve upon it?

These questions are offered merely as suggestions. Try coming up with your own.

Next Issue: *Inquiry and Participation*

minds in motion
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